

## Behind the corpse paint: A Look Into Death Metal

In a dark club in Gothenburg, Sweden, five boys no older than 17 prepared to take to the stage: two guitarists, a drummer, a bassist, and a vocalist. They were tall and gangly, with long hair and charcoal “corpse paint” on their faces. To the outside observer they might look more like miscreants than musicians, but they were musicians nonetheless. They certainly didn’t look like they’d spent three days a week, for the past three weeks, diligently practicing not only their material, but their stagecraft as well. They called themselves Gravehammer, and like many others, death metal provided them an outlet for their musical inclinations.

Death metal is just one of numerous subgenres of metal music, and it carries an odd stigma. To many, the sound is unpleasant and the aesthetic strange and intimidating. But, like a good number of metal subcultures, the aesthetic springs from the music itself.

Most metal fans are more than happy to tell you about the nuances of their favorite genres, but the uninitiated, on the other hand, may have a hard time telling them apart. At face value each genre seems quite similar, but each is distinguished by the technical aspects and themes of the music. So what separates death metal from other subgenres?

The overall goal of most death metal acts is to create a sound that is low-pitched, aggressive, abrupt, and quick (Boström, 2017). This is accomplished by utilizing a unique combination of techniques. Death metal employs guttural, growling vocals known as “death growls,” (Boström,

2017). These low-pitched vocals add to an already foreboding sound, and are one of the most unique facets of the music.

Typically death metal acts will tune down their guitars and bass guitars to achieve a low-pitched, abrasive sound. Guitarists will also employ palm muting, where the musician holds their palms over the bridge of the instrument. This mutes the sound, as the name implies, and creates shorter, more concise notes.

To create a quick and intense sound, there are various drumming techniques unique to the death metal genre. Blast beat is a drumming technique in which the bass and snare drums are hit in rapid succession, which gives a very high-paced, intense sound (Boström, 2017). Double bass pedaling, the more common technique, involves two bass drum pedals hitting the bass drum in succession.

The combination of these techniques results in a sound that can be intimidating and off-putting. But beyond the sound, death metal typically delves into subjects that may also leave one feeling a bit uncomfortable. As the genre's name would imply, death, violence, and gore are common themes in death metal lyrics and are regarded as the source of the genre's poor reputation. But death metal acts often expand into mythology, occultism, religion, and even politics, although this fact is less known.

You could be forgiven for thinking the violent themes and harsh sounds of death metal would appeal to a very unusual, and brutal, set of individuals, but death metal fans are surprisingly kind

and friendly. André Boström, former bassist for Gravehammer, recalls his times with the community fondly. “The crowds were nice, and easy to interact with in general,” Boström says, “They come out to these shows to relax and have some beer, like any other place. The theme is just different.”

Where country music fans might wear blue jeans and cowboy boots, death metal fans tend to go for combat boots and black leather jackets with nails in them. As a pop singer may wear dramatic beauty makeup, death metal musicians often paint their faces with white and black: the legendary corpse paint. The fans, and musicians, use the look as an expression of their personality and affinity for the genre: a dark look for a dark sound.

So why do some people prefer death growls to upbeat harmonies? The same reason some people prefer tea over coffee: personal taste. While death metal may not have mass appeal, the sound captivates its fans the way that EDM or country music captivate theirs. Like any subculture, death metal speaks to a group of people who feel misunderstood by the mainstream. That isn't intimidating or weird, it's a feeling we can all understand.

## References

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